
Introduction

Taylor and Emma started college at Midwest University during the fall of 2004.¹ They had a lot in common. They lived on the same residence hall floor and planned to pursue careers in dentistry.² Like virtually all of their floormates, they were white, American-born, heterosexual, unmarried with no children, and roughly eighteen years old.³ Both had strong high school records: Emma had earned “straight A’s and was in all of the advanced placement classes” (Y1).⁴ Taylor reported a 3.78 high school grade point average (GPA). Although Taylor’s family was more affluent than Emma’s, both were from middle- or upper-middle-class families. The two women majored in biology and took advantage of opportunities to further their career goals.

Their circumstances one year after graduation differed dramatically. Taylor left with a 3.6 GPA and was enrolled in dental school. She was thrilled:

I decided on [Top 15 Dental School], and I’m really happy. I like it here. . . . Everyone I’ve talked to who’s graduated has had [job] offers. . . . Starting salary’s like \$90,000, and then I think it can go pretty high from there. (Y5)

Emma graduated with a 3.0 GPA and was working as a dental assistant—making \$11 an hour in a job that did not require a bachelor’s degree. She, not surprisingly, was disappointed:

When I first started working, I felt ridiculous. I felt like I was wasting all of my schooling and I just felt that I didn’t belong there with those people because I should be doing something else with people who have college degrees. (Y5)

Disparity in career prospects does not fully capture differences in their class trajectories at college exit. Emma was forced to return home and live

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with her parents in a small Rust Belt city, further constraining her job opportunities. Her \$10,000 student loan bill, though small compared with those of others, loomed large given her income. Graduate school was not possible as she was in competition with science majors who did not get into medical school. Emma explained:

I applied to a clinical laboratory scientist program. I didn't get in. . . . They only pick four students a year. A lot of kids . . . if they don't get into medical school then they apply to this program. . . . It was based off your GPA and a lot of these kids were coming in with extremely, extremely, high GPAs. (Y5)

Emma's lack of direction tied her closer to her boyfriend, Joe, a working-class man. She noted:

The other option if I didn't get into the program was to move . . . and be with Joe. So this August, I will be moving. . . . Right now, it's like I have no choice. . . . It doesn't make any sense for me to stay in [my hometown] and do a job that I don't really like and I can't progress in. (Y5)

As Joe was in the military, the move would take her far from her family, to somewhere where she had no social ties. Living on base required being married and living off was more expensive, putting pressure on Emma to marry young. Joe's position offered health and educational benefits she could access as his wife, but his entry-level military pay was low.

In contrast, Taylor, in dental school, was enmeshed in a vibrant campus community. Generous parental support had allowed her to graduate with no debt, despite having to pay out-of-state tuition. Her parents were prepared to continue to cushion her transition to adulthood with substantial subsidies—although this would probably be unnecessary. Taylor was single and meeting fellow dental students but was in no rush to marry. Because she could support herself she did not need to settle. As Taylor told us, "I just want the perfect man" (Y5).

Taking into account past and future parental support and marital as well as career prospects, Taylor appeared on track to reproduce her upper-middle-class origins. Emma, conversely, left college at risk of downward mobility. It might be tempting to view these outcomes as meritocracy at work. Such an explanation is unconvincing, though, as Emma and Taylor were similarly well prepared and motivated at the outset of college. As we detail in Chapter 7, their fates diverged upon entering the organizational infrastructure of Midwest University. Here, relatively small class differences were magnified, sending them in different directions.